CHALLENGES IN BRIDGING THE L2 LITERACY DIVIDE: A GUIDE FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS DEALING WITH ADULT LEARNERS

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"Bigotry is the disease of ignorance, of morbid minds; enthusiasm of the free and buoyant. Education and free discussion are the antidotes of both."

Thomas Jefferson

Abstract

Extensive theoretical discourse has centered on the broad subject of literacy within both academic and general contexts. In modern language classrooms, much attempt is made to foster both comprehension and composition skills utilizing often complex texts in the hope that adult learners may become familiar with the more rudimentary aspects of a target language with the ultimate aim of improving their literacy competency for various rationales. Numerous obstacles need to be overcome in order to achieve this aim. Many of these challenges are not well understood by educators which unfortunately results in poor levels of achievement by learners who often feel they are not able to complete such a seemingly insurmountable task. Educators wishing to engage learners effectively in the higher processes and competency of learning to read and write proficiently need to understand the difficulties many learners face in attempting to unlock the many enigmatic parameters of any new language with respect to higher level receptive and productive conventions. This process needs to begin by challenging previously held notions regarding teaching adults how to read and write in a target language by focusing on the learner's needs rather than a generic process which will hopefully bring out the desired outcome in every case. As educators, we need to provide our learners with the tools and materials in order to achieve any level of progress. Motivation, patience and dedication are the labor to achieve this aim. The following discussion is not only aimed at teachers involved in English language instruction, but also for those involved in the delivery of other languages.

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Many modern dictionaries define literacy simply as 'the ability to read and write'; however, more recent studies of the literacy process have shown that literacy is not simply a case of 'black and white'. Many young adults today have only achieved what is termed 'partial literacy'; that is, they still lack competency in some of the higher levels of reception or production in their native language. Moreover, different types of literacy have emerged such as computer, functional, information, basic, critical, and dynamic to name just a few. These terms do not all imply the ability to read and write but rather connote a notion that literacy is more the ability to comprehend and navigate a wide array of functions relevant to their respective parameters, such as being able to operate a computer with regard to both hardware and software platforms. In terms of language, literacy requires the encoding and decoding of text as well as extracting wider meaning rather than merely comprehending individual words. Once speakers have acquired their native language and gained competency in its written forms, crossing the threshold towards reading and writing a new language may seem simple at first, but once the journey has begun, numerous challenges present themselves in many forms.

Literacy once had its roots in the corridors of power whereby only the elite of any society had access to education giving value to the old adage that 'information is power'. Today, this power is available to a much wider spectrum of the populace due largely to a greater distribution of wealth in many societies coupled with the more recent advent of globalization promoting English as a commercial lingua franca. Pope's (1993) study of numerous academic and government texts on literacy resulted in her concluding that attaining competent literacy in many forms should foster:

- The ability to communicate and work collaboratively;
- The ability to work effectively in a multicultural society and workforce;
- The ability to adapt;
- The ability to think critically;
- The ability to use available technology;
- The ability to think and act creatively and imaginatively.

As teachers we hope that our students can attain most if not all of these attributes; however, we must also be aware of the challenges that our students face in attempting to master the art of text based communication in a second language within the classroom and beyond.

Challenges in Attaining Second Language Literacy:

Motivation / Attitude

Both motivation and attitude are inextricably intertwined in many cases. A poor attitude will often result in a lower motivation to learn. Students thereby feel that the task is too difficult and may come to a dead end. Many of us have encountered the unmotivated student who seems to persistently avoid engaging in any classroom activities. Unfortunately, many of these individuals do not possess the enthusiasm to achieve literacy in the language we are trying to teach them. While a small percentile manage to slip through the cracks to pass the course, most learn the harsher lesson of 'no pain - no gain'.

As teachers, part of this motivational aspect lies with us. Where possible, we need to provide encouragement to these students but ultimately once we push the cart; it will either come to rest or continue under its (the student's) own power. This is particularly pertinent where a student is trying his or her best. We need to throw out the life raft when they fall overboard and get them back on deck. If the student is not trying at all, then we need to remind them of their impending fate. We need to find out why they are attending the course. An investigation could reveal that they are being pushed by their parents or are merely utilizing the class as an extension to an already hectic social network. Although we can provide

the motivation aspect, attitude still rests with the student.

Age

'You can't teach an old dog new tricks'; a rather crude way of making this point but effective nonetheless. While there are exceptions to every rule, the majority establish the trend. In 1967, a linguist by the name of Eric Lenneberg devised what is known as the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) in second language learning in his publication *Biological Foundations of Language*. Lenneberg worked within the conventional notional findings of Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device theory in cognitive language studies. In short, this hypothesis posits the view that attaining native speaker like competency in a second language decreases rapidly with age. One could assume that this 'age' is quite far in life but rather it is surprisingly young. The conventional belief is that phonological neurons in the brain reach maturity and 'seal' at around six years old and the structural neurons (grammar) at around puberty (up to 15 years old). Lenneberg believed that the language areas of the brain could easily acquire any new language provided they are stimulated at the right time, mainly prior to six years of age for complete fluency. This involves part of what is termed 'cerebral plasticity'; that is, the younger we are, the more we are able to learn. As babies, our brains are like sponges and we attain our native language as well as other aspects of knowledge remarkably fast. Thus, beyond these ages, a speaker will carry an accent (phonological coloring from his or her native language) and possess gaps in the target language's lexicon and grammar. CPH has been the focus of controversy among experts since its formulation. While this theory deals largely with spoken language, the higher demands of attaining literacy are relevant as well.

Exposure to the Target Language

English is not spoken widely in many countries thus we are forced to use whatever resources at our disposal in the English language. The hiring of English native speakers in the many language classrooms in the wider world has had mixed results but ultimately the decision rests with the students regarding practice in their own time. For all of us, our language is our comfort zone, our security blanket and identity. Our students will speak their native language the minute they get out the door, often even most of the class time. Classrooms of mixed ethnicities are ideal as students are forced to interact in English, but when we have an English language class with thirty or so students of common ethnicity, it is quite common for them to interact in their native language. Many students have been fortunate enough to attend universities in native English speaking countries such as Australia, England or the United States and in such cases they are forced to speak English when interacting with locals thus they acquire forms more rapidly. More to the point, resources in more obscure languages such as Japanese, Korean, Italian, Indonesian or Thai are considerably scarcer in foreign classrooms as these languages are mainly spoken in those respective nations, and again, studying in these countries would facilitate the learning of their respective languages.

Societal Barriers

Cross's (1982) study of the U.S. education sector found that there were three main barriers to learning for students.

1) *Situational barriers* - Such as lack of day care facilities or students unable to find a child minder at class times if they had children, inability to afford tuition fees.

2) *Institutional barriers* - Such as lack of facilities at a particular college or school, for example limited wheel chair access, entertainment venues, canteen space or inadequate library fa-

cilities.

3) *Dispositional barriers* - Such as lack of challenge in courses, lack of choice in course options, or lack of faith in teaching staff.

Quigley's (1991) research left off from Cross's study whereby Quigley surveyed a wide sector of the adult student population in U.S. colleges who had failed and/or withdrawn from a course. Quigley found that dispositional barriers attributed to the most number of failures and 'drop outs' in courses. Moreover, many of these surveyed students complained that their teachers did not seem interested in the progress of class members and offered little time for assistance in the way of feedback and extra tuition when requested.

Linguistic Barriers

Generally speaking, the more similar a target language is to the source language the easier it is to acquire, for example, a native Italian speaker learning Spanish; or a native speaker of Mandarin learning Cantonese. There is less incidence of negative transfer or mother tongue interference. Where matters become difficult for literacy though, is when these languages differ in the manner in which they represent their written forms.

The term *Orthography* refers to a language's writing convention. We may be familiar with such terms as 'letters' and 'characters'; however, in linguistic circles the term given to such symbols in a language's orthography is *graphemes*. English, like most European languages, has a Roman alphabet utilizing 26 graphemes in a phonographic convention; that is, one grapheme is one sound (often called a phoneme). Thai however, has its own set of graphemes consisting of some 44 consonants and 22 vowels. Each grapheme though represents one sound making it phonographic but utilizes a different standard where vowels can precede, sit above, below or follow a consonant. A few markers (diacritics) are also employed to represent tone.

Japanese on the other hand has a *syllabic* orthography where one syllable in the language is one grapheme, so the greeting Kon-i-chi-wa would employ 4 graphemes, or 'characters' in layman terms. Japanese phonology dictates that it is a C-V-C language, which means that a consonant must be followed by a vowel hence the pronunciation of some lexically borrowed words from English like *milk* become 'milikur' where vowels are inserted to eliminate consonant clusters. To add even a little frustration, Japanese uses four orthographies - Hirigana, Katakana ,Kanji and Romaji (Romanized alphabet); each being used in their own domain such as the spelling of foreign words like Coca Cola, Starbucks and so forth.

Mandarin Chinese employs a *logographic* orthography where one morpheme is one grapheme, so Mandarin uses one 'character' for each unit of meaning in the language and is also traditionally written from top to bottom. Arabic has a different orthography again and is written from right to left. Many other languages employ markers to differentiate tone or a variant on that grapheme's pronunciation. Thus we can appreciate a great deal of difficulty when moving from any one of these languages to another. The words we can learn and speak, but becoming familiar with each grapheme will take time, patience and tenacity, which leads me to my next related point: **Spelling**.

Orthographies, in terms of how graphemes are arranged and pronounced, are of two main types: *Shallow* and *deep*.

In a shallow orthography, there is a narrow or shallow disparity between the grapheme - phoneme relationship. In other words, the graphemes are usually always pronounced the same thus there is little to no variation in spelling and pronunciation. Italian and Spanish (Romance languages derived from Latin) are both regarded as shallow orthographies, and based on extensive longitudinal studies; children often acquire fluency in these languages at an earlier age.

Within a deep orthography though, there is a wide or deep disparity between the grapheme -

phoneme relationship. English is a prime example. Look at these three words: **Rough - Tough - Dough**. The first two sound like RUFF /rVf/ and TUFF /tVf/, but if I teach these first two words to a person who is unfamiliar with the English language he or she will logically presume the third word is DUFF /dVf/ right? But it is not. It is pronounced DOE as in TOE. Individual graphemes can be bi-phonemic, for example, the letter **c** can either be a /k/ or /s/ sound in English as in *cat* and *cent*. Deep orthographies have such discrepancies. You can appreciate that learners will attempt to spell a word similarly in pronunciation to another word they know which leads to common spelling errors and English is littered with such anomalies such as with the following words: bought - caught, pain - lane, box - socks, pneumatic - numeric (pn-n disparity), phone - foam (ph-f disparity), actually I could right - write these all day! But how did this occur?

English has had a rather exciting journey since it originated around the sixth century AD emerging from a lower Germanic (early German) dialect. English once had what is known as a glottal fricative phoneme (try to clear your throat by expelling air from your lungs while the top rear of your tongue is pressed at the back of your oral tract like you are coughing up something and listen to the sound); -ough had this sound thus these three words were once /rVh/, /tVh/, /dVh/. They all rhymed! But as the language changed from Old English to Middle English and even Modern English; splits began to occur and this phoneme slowly disappeared. Vowels changed as well: *house* and *mouse* were once pronounced /hu:s/ (hoose) and /mu:s/ (moose) and there are many more. Old English plurals were mainly -en rather than -s, and only two words survived: children and oxen. To make matters worse, as English traveled, it changed in certain regions. American English, British English, Australian English, Indian English, New Zealand English to name a few which are termed regional variations; so the rear compartment of a car in British English is termed boot but is the trunk in American English. A portable container for carrying ice to keep drinks cold (invented in Australia I might add) is a cooler in the U.S., an esky in Australia (named after the Eskimos), a *cool-box* in the U.K and a *chilly-bin* in New Zealand. German, French, Dutch, Spanish, Turkish and even Arabic have left their mark on English. Irregular verbs and plurals are equally menacing to English language learners and reading is no picnic either whereby homonyms are not always distinguished easily in their respective contexts such as their, there and *they're*. Many native speakers make errors when dealing with such words. Can you now appreciate how much fun your students are having?

Biological / Physiological Barriers

It is quite safe to state explicitly that people are different. We all have different personalities, looks, appearances, beliefs, opinions, likes, dislikes, skills and abilities. Some people learn very fast while others need quite a lot of time. We witness this regularly in the language classroom. Some students just acquire forms and impress us with quality results while others need to work two or three times as hard to achieve a similar outcome. Learning a language is not like learning about geography, history or science where memorizing chunks of information will suffice on exam day. It is more like mathematics whereby core concepts and methods need to be understood before we employ practical applications. We need exposure to these frameworks in order to get in and 'have a go'. When we encounter less capable students, it is paramount that they feel supported with a little attention.

As a great deal of language is conceptual, particularly structurally where words have semantic relations with concepts, we need to steer away from the notion that words just 'mean something'. Close your eyes and say the word 'dog', you picture a dog NOT as any particular dog but its concept as a four legged animal which has fur and barks. An elephant also has four legs but is

considerably larger in size and does not bark thus it is a different concept. We are not talking about a referent here as argued by Goddard (1998); that is, we do not view one type of dog every time, but rather its concept. Think about the words respect and admire, it would be inaccurate to assume both words mean that you like someone because in history, armies have respected fearsome enemies but not admired them. Thus these words have different concepts. Because writing involves a cognitive process, we may assume that cognitive conceptualization plays a role in not only learning how to write, but being able to organize ideas in our minds using the concepts we know from the target language and reproducing them efficiently on paper. Reading is much the same but in reverse. Structures are acquired receptively and arranged cognitively provided a familiar concept is attached to them. Moving from listening to reading (reception) and speaking to writing (production) requires somewhat of a paradigmatic shift from a phono-acoustic to a graphic-visual platform. Reproducing a complex object on paper requires a drawer to conceptualize it first. In this process, just as there are skilled artists, mathematicians and scientists there are also better language learners. This conceptualization is also used in other aspects of language learning such as learning correct pronunciation as cited by Fraser's (2001) association in assisting language teachers learn more about teaching pronunciation as part of an Australian state government initiative.

Lack of Understanding, Standards, Training and Knowledge

Apart from those types of teachers that were mentioned in Quigley's study, many language teachers do not appreciate the difficulties learners face in acquiring literacy (even conversation) in a second language. It is assumed that students will just have to memorize large amounts of information and practice in their own time. These teachers often take short teacher training courses which throw them in front of a group of 'practice' learners thinking that if they just stand there and talk, most of what they say will be absorbed. Some students also believe that once they pay their course fee and sit in the classroom, they will learn the language effortlessly; they fail to realise that language is more effectively learned in social contexts; that is, real language in real situations. We quickly forget how we learned our first language. Have you ever traveled abroad and needed to look up a tourist language guide to find out how to say "How much does this cost?", "Where's the bus station or toilet?" You find you learn these fast because it places you in a situation where you must interact in order to complete a task. Your memory processes this information and gives it a priority based upon its value to you, thus you retain it for longer. A phone number you will most likely never call has an almost zero chance of being remembered.

Coupled with this is poor education at a young age. Raynor et. al (2001) argue that many adults suffer from poor literacy skills because they were taught bad reading and writing habits from young using inefficient techniques and /or mistakes and shortcomings were not noticed or addressed by teachers. Even today, there is still a great deal of controversy regarding the benefits of either the phonics or whole language approaches in Australia. In numerous Asian countries, some schools uphold the policy that students cannot fail and in extreme cases, scores are changed at the end of the school semester so that a failed student passes. These schools fear that parents will take their children to another school that will pass them. They fear that failing students will make them appear as a bad school thus greater emphasis is placed on quantity rather than quality of language teaching. Students who are byproducts of this system then adopt a languid attitude believing that they have passed all those years due to their own effort. If language teachers can become more aware of the procedure involved in the language learning process, they would be able to assist less capable students more instead of regarding them as

lazy or unintelligent. In this sense, quality of language exposure needs to take precedence over quantity. Students overexposed to language material often start to regress.

Methods to Promote Second Language Literacy:

Offer Support

This has been mentioned previously but deserves mentioning again as it also promotes motivation. We are not only teachers, but we are also counselors. Students look to us for advice and guidance. If we walk into the classroom, hand a whole stack of papers to the students and sit back to read the newspaper, we deserve what we get - which is nothing. Walking around and offering advice to students who look as if they are stuck will mean a lot to them. We need to be available outside of class as well. If we get stopped moving around a school or campus grounds by students asking for clarification on a point, extra information or just to have a discussion, then take the time to interact. If you have no time, follow up with that student when it is more convenient. Advice on things such as after class practice is good too. If a student likes computer related topics for example, try to find an article on that topic in the target language which may assist him or her become familiar with the language's terms and register.

Try New Methods

Some time ago, I thought I would try something new in one of my writing classes. I recalled a portion of my linguistics training regarding second language acquisition and remembered the strategy of *scaffolding*. Scaffolding (just as in the sense of building construction) is where students actually help each other learn a target language by listening to each other's speech, the weaker ones learn from the stronger ones. Being more a conversational strategy, I decided to try it in writing. It was a morning Basic English class with some Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese students. The topic was writing about routines. I asked the students to close their books and take out a sheet of paper. I then asked them to write a paragraph describing what they do in the mornings on days when they attend classes. They knew they had to complete this in both the first person singular and present simple tense because I had already taught this. When they finished I took the papers up and redistributed them in random order so that each student had someone else's paper. I asked them to change all pronouns from the first to the third person in the nominative case (I to he/she) and correct the corresponding verb tenses in each sentence. Once they had done this I redistributed the papers again so that each student again had a different sheet and asked them to identify and correct every error they could find. I then had each sheet returned to its original owner to see what others had marked. I requested students ask me for clarification on marked errors they disagreed with. The lesson soon ended and to my utter amazement I noticed students from differing ethnic and language backgrounds speaking English to each other.

I concluded that the exercise assisted in:

- Writing practice;
- Scaffolding language;
- Exposure to authentic grammatical judgements;
- Peer review of writing; and
- Promotion of dialogue between students.

Do not be frightened to try something new if you feel the course book will be less beneficial or challenging to students for that lesson. Try and organize an activity where every student can get involved. Try to introduce relevant material that students can relate to; for example, Chinese students may not be as well engaged in an exercise which centers on traveling around London if they have never been there. Moreover, language is learned via social interactions and in practical contexts, it is how we learned our first language

so it is how we can learn a second and so on thus encouraging some dialogue between students in class, such as a discussion on which new MP3 player is better will fair well between younger students. Older students may like to discuss shopping, motor vehicles or favorite holiday destinations.

CONCLUSION

A common misconception of literacy is that it is purely the ability to read and write. The mere cognitive complexity of a simple conversation from listening to what a speaker is saying, processing a response in mere seconds and vocally producing it is quite amazing in itself. Being able to process information from and to a written form is certainly just as if not more complex. Language literacy is not merely having an ability to read words off a page or produce language in written form, but more a capacity to decode and encode language in concordance with the perpetuation of meaning. Language teachers involved in literacy instruction need to be aware of the many challenges their students face in attempting to navigate a new language's written convention. This involves a great deal of patience and understanding, particularly with respect to differing student ability. Poor teacher training and/or poor student literacy in his or her native language results in this journey being more demanding.

Think about what you need to build a house. Forget about architecture for a moment and think of materials; wood or steel for the frame, bricks and mortar or cement for the outer walls and so on. Language teaching possesses similar qualities where; as instructors, we need to provide our students with the required materials. The hardest part is the labor. Someone has to put it all together; we cannot build the house, they must build it themselves using the labor of patience, motivation and determination. We can not learn the language for them. The frame (grammar), bricks (words) and cement (meaning) can be arranged to suit each student and their new 'house' will be a reflection on their amount of labor. There are numerous challenges in this effort but with the right mix of understanding and skill, our students can then help someone else build their house and so on. It is how civilization and culture began; and language is no different.

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